

The War on the War on Poverty

Hey, hey, the case for LBJ.

O

n November 27, 1963, Lyndon Johnson delivered his first address to Congress as president. In one of the greatest speeches of his career, he invoked the legacy of the recently slain John F. Kennedy in calling for a new era of social improvement led by a progressive federal government. Kennedy, he noted, had stood at the same podium only a few years earlier and “told his countrymen that our national work would not be finished ‘in the first thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But,’ he said, ‘let us begin.’ Today in this moment of new resolve, I would say to all my fellow Americans, let us continue.”

And so began the most active period of federal policy-making since the New Deal. The Great Society, in which hundreds of pieces of legislation, from the Civil Rights Act to the National Endowment for the Arts to the National Water Commission, passed from Congress to the president’s pen in just five years. Much of the best-known legislation, particularly that which applied to social

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policy, was grouped under the umbrella designation of “The War on Poverty,” in which millions went to education, housing, job training, and health care. Johnson’s intention was in some ways a conservative one: Like his hero Franklin Roosevelt, he built his social vision around giving a “hand up,” not a “hand out.” In a 1964 special address to Congress, he explained that his anti-poverty efforts would “help [recipients] support their families in dignity while preparing themselves for new work.” Out of the initial legislation’s six titles, the vast majority of the funding went to just two of them, one for job-training and one to establish community action programs, through which educational, legal, and child-health care resources would be funneled.

But within five years, the optimism of that era was gone. By the summer of 1968, Johnson had withdrawn from his reelection campaign, and Republicans were gleefully attacking liberal activism for the rising crime rates and urban unrest of the 1960s. In the stagflation-plagued decade that followed, conservatives blamed the War on Poverty for a raft of society’s ills—unemployment, crime, drug-dealing—that were primarily the result of changes in the American economy, Republican monetary policy, and long-entrenched welfare programs that had nothing to do with LBJ’s efforts. Nevertheless, “Blame the Great Society” quickly became a key part of the GOP’s rhetorical arsenal; recall Ronald Reagan’s famous quip that “the federal government declared war on poverty, and poverty won.”

In time, this became not just a Republican talking point, but the conventional wisdom. By 1978, Jimmy Carter was declaring that “government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy.” Not all liberals believe this today, but it’s a fair bet that many lean closer to Carter than to LBJ. As columnist E.J. Dionne, Jr. wrote recently, “Democrats have lost enormous ground by allowing a myth to take hold that Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society was a failure.”

Nevertheless, received wisdom is not always wisdom itself. In fact, by many metrics, the Great Society was a ringing success. Environmental regulations such as the Clean Water Restoration Act caused a steady decline in pollution levels still going on today. Head Start and other education programs gave millions of poor children a leg up in school, while Medicare, Medicaid, and increased Social Security benefits reduced poverty rates among the elderly from 28 percent in 1965 to 11 percent in 1996.

Looking back from 2007, these all seem like so many debating points. And yet how we act today—as individuals and as a society—is largely determined by how we understand the lessons of yesterday. Too many Americans still shrink at the thought of national health insurance, for example, because they have

been raised to see such efforts as hubristic retreads of government overreach. But given the challenges America faces at home and abroad, rarely has the case for concerted, activist government efforts been stronger. The decay of public infrastructure, the growing wealth gap, and the collapsing health care system are all examples of the market's failure to respond to its own externalities. If liberal policymakers are to succeed in preparing the country for these challenges, they must be able to see Johnson's November 1963 speech not as the onset of a misadventure but as an inspiration.

The first step in unraveling the enigma of the Great Society is to ask what, precisely, we mean by the term. To many contemporary pundits, it is a graveyard of unsuccessful antipoverty programs. But, to adapt the terminology of one of those critics, they are defining the Great Society down; it was so much more than that. It included the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (which expanded college loan programs), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Medicare, and Medicaid, as well as moral triumphs like the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act. The list of Great Society targets included product safety, the arts, water pollution, and truth in packaging, among literally hundreds of others. Few would call these efforts failures, and yet they are a direct result of Johnson's activist vision.

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What casual critics of the Great Society really mean to attack is the War on Poverty. Directed largely through the Office of Economic Opportunity, the War on Poverty included programs ranging from the Small Business Loan Program to the College Work Study Program, the Job Corps, and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). The effort was hardly perfect: Too much emphasis was placed on job-training and not enough on job creation. Too many programs were designed without input from the communities—despite being designed to serve and be used by communities—and they were ineffective as a result. Critics then and now like to point out that many grants for community action went to unproven and impractical projects. But, for all its flaws, the War on Poverty was hardly a failure. Between 1965 and 1970, the number of poor Americans fell from 33 million to 25 million (despite the 1969–1970 recession). Incomes for poor African Americans rose dramatically, as did high-school graduation rates, while infant mortality dropped. After writing several books examining every aspect

of the War on Poverty, political scientist Sar Levitan, in an article with Robert Taggart, concluded, “As a result of Great Society civil rights and other initiatives, blacks made very substantial gains on a number of fronts during the 1960s.”

In fact, the War on Poverty’s biggest failing was not overcommitment, but a lack of funds. While many experts at the time said that a substantive attack on poverty would cost in the range of \$30 billion a year, Congress repeatedly authorized about \$2 billion, with heavy restrictions (in part because of conservative opposition, but also because of the costs of the Vietnam War). More important, however, was the fact that many promising programs did not last long enough to have full effect. Although Richard Nixon at first maintained and even, in some limited ways, expanded War on Poverty programs during his first term, he did so largely to peel off moderates in the upcoming 1972 election. After his decisive win that year, he cut viciously. Predictably, by mid-decade, poverty-rate declines flattened, then reversed.

Critics like Charles Murray have used the dramatic rise in poverty and crime that followed the Great Society as evidence of its failure—the War on Poverty created, in their eyes, a “culture of dependency” that prevented the poor from moving up and out of the ghetto. But they confuse chronology with causation. Great Society assistance may have led some to avoid looking for work, but then there weren’t many jobs to be had in the first place, thanks to industrial flight from urban cores, as well as the entrance of the baby boom into the work force during the beginning of a lengthy economic downturn. As Brookings economist Harry Holzer explained in 2005, “The biggest thing that changed subsequent to 1970 is the labor market . . . Very simply, growth slowed down and inequality rose very dramatically.” And Nixon and Gerald Ford deserve more of the blame than LBJ for that shift—and subsequent rises in welfare rolls—as their monetary policy accepted high unemployment in exchange for low inflation. Of course, by then it was becoming accepted wisdom that the War on Poverty was at fault. As Levitan warned, again with Taggart, “Prudence would caution against accepting the claims of policy-makers and economists eager to pass the buck for their own dismal record.” But thanks in large part to the 27 cumulative years of Republican presidencies, many, perhaps even most, Americans have done just that.

For too long the grand rhetoric of the Great Society, combined with conservatives’ successful demonization of the War on Poverty, have created a *reductio ad absurdum* view of government for many Americans: Because the Great Society did not eliminate poverty or racism, it proves that government activism is always a bad thing. But had it not reached for such heights, it wouldn’t have achieved what it did. Johnson’s vision was always an open-ended

one; for all his stirring rhetoric, he stood by Kennedy's warning that America's goals would not be achieved "in the first thousand days, nor in the life of this administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet."

The Great Society was never about just building big government. It was about creating a dynamic government. It recognized that progress meant not just improving lives but improving the way government responded to people's needs. As Johnson said in a 1964 speech in Ann Arbor, Michigan, "The Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor." A glint of this spirit animated the Clinton Administration, before it got bogged down in scandal and congressional opposition.

Once again, America confronts an array of challenges, from wage inequality and failing schools to environmental degradation and access to quality health care: the same ones America faced in the 1960s. The specifics are different, as is the range of possible solutions, but in many cases the government stance needs to be the same. When a global economy can give and take away jobs overnight, when health care costs are rising and access is shrinking, when the income gap is reaching near-historic proportions—in short, when market forces come to dominate more and more of our lives—we need a government that is not afraid to make big plans to make up for the market's imperfections. It behooves liberals to reject the idea, embraced by many in the wake of the Great Society, that government cannot play a meaningful role in shaping society. As Johnson said, let us continue. ■